

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 1909.

## THE NATURAL HISTORY OF CONDUCT.

*The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas.*

By E. Westermarck. In 2 vols. Vol. ii. Pp. xv+852. (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1908.) Price 14s. net.

THE present volume completes Prof. Westermarck's work, which is likely to remain for a long time a standard repertory of facts, which the moralists of every school will, no doubt, set themselves to interpret, each after his own fashion. *Hic liber est in quo quaeret sua dogmata quisque*, and it is as a tribute to the author's erudition and fulness of matter that I hasten to add that the second half of the distich is also likely to be fulfilled; there are few schools of moralists who will not find something to their taste in this vast repertory of information about the moral codes and practices of mankind. The practices and beliefs of different races and ages with respect to the rights and duties of property, regard for the truth, concern for the general happiness, suicide, sexual relations, religion, and the supernatural generally, such are only a few of the topics with which Prof. Westermarck deals, and he deals with none of them without producing masses of significant fact for which, apart from his aid, the student of moral ideas and institutions would have to search hopelessly through the whole literature of anthropology. Merely to have done so much, even if Prof. Westermarck had gone no further, would have been to establish an inextinguishable claim on the gratitude of his readers, but it need not be said of the author of the "History of Human Marriage" that he has attempted to do much more. His aim, at least, is not merely to record the facts and classify them, but to offer a philosophical interpretation of them, to put forward a definite theory of the "origin" and "development" of the ethical side of human thought. It is quite out of the question for a single reviewer, who is not even an anthropologist, to presume to pronounce a summary judgment upon the success with which the task has been executed, and the present writer would therefore be understood to be attempting nothing more than the utterance of one or two of the reflections suggested to one interested reader by Prof. Westermarck's book.

In one respect, the work before us, even if attention were confined to the present volume alone, is less fortunate than the book by which the author made his great reputation as an anthropologist years ago. The "History of Human Marriage" was not merely a great collection of interesting facts; it had a very definite thesis, which was kept in view from the very first, and of which the reader was never allowed to lose sight for long, and that thesis had the further attraction of being, in the then state of anthropological speculation, a novel one. The present work has also, of course, its thesis, but it is one which is, for the greater part of the time, obscured by the very masses of detailed fact which are marshalled in support of it. Perhaps there never was a book in which it was harder to see the wood for the trees, or from which

it would be easier to carve out whole monographs on connected groups of moral practices which seem to have no special bearing on the author's or any other man's theory of the fundamental character of moral action and the moral judgment. The main thesis, when one reaches it, is, perhaps, also a little disappointing. In essentials, it seems to contain nothing which is not already familiar to the student of so old-established a moralist as Hume, except, perhaps, the employment of the expression "altruistic" sentiment, in the sense of pleasure or pain awakened by our consciousness of the pleasure or pain of others, and this, again, is familiar to us from Comtism. Briefly put, the author's position is that the moral concepts (good, bad, right, wrong, and the rest) are based on "moral emotions," and that *moral* emotions (the sense of approval and censure) are retributive in character, censure being akin to revenge, approval to gratitude. These emotions themselves are things which "have been acquired by means of natural selection in the struggle for existence." A censorious critic would probably remark that, so far as regards the "origin" of the moral judgment, this theory leaves us just where it found us. "Natural selection," even if we allow it all the significance which has been claimed for it by the ultra-Darwinians, can, at best, account for the preservation of a favourable variation when it presents itself. Prof. Westermarck almost seems to invoke it to account for the variations it preserves. It is more to my purpose, however, to urge that the reduction of all moral judgments to the expression of "retributive" emotion seems only possible if we confine morality to the class of acts which are directly approved or blamed on account of their effect on some being other than the agent. If we do this, we are led at once into a breach with unsophisticated moral opinion. *E.g.* such opinion would pronounce it absurd to hold that a prudential regard for one's own future, a devotion to one's own physical and mental improvement, are not valuable moral qualities.

I note that Prof. Westermarck seems at times inclined to admit these, and even more startling, paradoxes. He habitually distinguishes between "prudential" and moral considerations, as if the same set of reasons for choosing a line of conduct might not fall under both heads at once, and, in one place, he even seems to suggest that we have no right to condemn two adults who choose to commit sodomy, on the ground that their behaviour hurts no one but themselves. (At least, he writes sympathetically of this doctrine, p. 483.) The example suggests a further criticism on the author's general philosophical standpoint. As it sufficiently shows, he really leaves no place in his system for a reasoned desire to promote the good of others, as distinct from an amiable tendency to enjoy witnessing their pleasure. Now it seems undeniable that the actual production of pleasure in others is only a very subordinate element in the kind of good which persons of ardent philanthropic zeal, without any preconceived theory of ethics, believe it their duty to promote. Just as I am conscious that pleasure, as such, is only a minor element

in the good I desire for myself, so I am conscious that it is only a minor element in the good I believe it my duty, say, as a father to promote for my child; and, as I say, I believe this conviction to be shared by the generality of high-minded men who are not pre-committed to any particular scheme of moral philosophy.

It may, no doubt, be said that the view is a mistaken one, but at least it is there, and it is a serious defect in a proposed analysis of actual morality that it leaves no way of accounting for the fact. Where Prof. Westermarck, if I may say so without presumption, goes wrong is in directing his attention primarily to the kinds of emotion which accompany moral judgments instead of attempting to study just the general character of the conduct upon which the judgments are passed. As Mr. Bradley put it long ago, with reference to J. S. Mill's account of poetry, "Anything in the way of shallow reflection on the psychological form rather than an attempt to grasp the content." It is the same undue preoccupation with psychological form as opposed to ethical content, as it seems to me, which makes Prof. Westermarck's attempts to trace and forecast the development of moral belief and practice disappointing. He has little that is suggestive to say about the actual development of the moral ideal within the history of civilisation; indeed, about the oldest and perhaps the most influential of still existing moral institutions, the Christian Church, he always writes with a lack of appreciation which might fairly have been blamed in an eighteenth-century *illuminé*, though one would have expected that, in its Catholic form, it would have appealed to him in virtue of its "cosmopolitanism." The chief prophecy he makes as to the future is that "the altruistic sentiment will continue to expand." Whether this is a prophecy of good I am not sure. No doubt it is, if it means that devotion to a common good is to become a more prominent factor in all our action. If it means that devotion to definite organisations for social life is to be replaced by aimless amiability towards the human race in general, there may be reason to doubt whether the substitution would be in the direction of genuine progress.

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#### POPULAR ELECTRICITY.

*Electricity Present and Future.* By Lucien Poincaré. Translated by Jasper Kemmis. Pp. viii+315. (London: Sisley's, Ltd., n.d.) Price 7s. 6d. net.

THE title of this book is certainly a misnomer, and any reader expecting therefrom to find the volume largely occupied with a prophecy of the future development of electricity is destined to be disappointed. Had the book been called "Electricity Past and Present," the subject-matter would have been much more correctly indicated, as a fair amount of historical matter is combined with the description of the present state of applied electricity. Regarded simply as a popular exposition of this state, the work has much to recommend it, but it is, perhaps, hardly fair to the author's intentions to look on it simply in this light. From the preface one gathers that the

intention has been to trace the tendencies observable in recent developments in electrical engineering, and to produce a work, to use the author's own words, "not unworthy a place in a collection of studies in scientific philosophy." Candidly, we must admit that we are not impressed with the "scientific philosophy" of the book, unless, indeed, it is philosophy to show how the simpler forms of machines and apparatus have been modified to suit the varied requirements of modern industry.

The first part of the book is occupied with theoretical matters, the main outlines of the theory of magnetism and of induction being clearly expounded. Then follow two chapters on generating machines and motors, a fairly long chapter on the transmission of energy, and finally two short chapters on electrochemistry and electric lighting. These chapters form the main portion of the book; they are clearly written, and give a clear and interesting account of the subjects with which they deal. We cannot help thinking that the addition of a few simple diagrams and illustrations would greatly assist the explanations of some of the more complicated points; the reader whose knowledge of electrical technology is not very extensive is likely to find some of the passages difficult to follow. Indeed, we think the whole book, excellent though it is in many respects, would be greatly improved by simplification and a frank abandonment of the philosophic aims which have helped to inspire it, and which have given rise, we think, to such defects as it possesses. Amongst such defects may be noted certain peculiarities of style which are apparently attempts to give the book a literary value, but which, in our opinion, have just the reverse effect. To quote one or two examples, we read, on p. 38, "M. Warburg justly claims the distinction of having been the first, in 1880 . . ." when we suppose all that is meant is that M. Warburg *has* the distinction, &c. On the same page a sentence referring to Ewing's work on hysteresis is immediately followed by a paragraph opening, "This same Ewing studied in all their complex details these phenomena." Why not say Ewing studied these phenomena in all their complex details? Instances could be multiplied almost indefinitely, but we will content ourselves with one other quotation. On p. 27 we read:—

"However, notwithstanding the high respect entertained for the ventures of this great scientist (*Faraday*), whose experiments were the most original and productive that science had seen in the nineteenth century, and notwithstanding the lucidity of his 'Experimental Researches in Electricity,' one cannot but feel surprised, even shocked, at the methods he employed in describing matters which are not in consonance with the conventional forms of mathematical symbols."

We are not quite sure what is the meaning, if any, of the last sentence, and whether it is the "methods" or the "matters" which offend; but assuredly the criticism is most unjust, and the author (or is it the translator?) could not do better than study that simplicity of language which enabled Faraday to confer such "lucidity" on his writings. After all, M. Poincaré is attempting a similar task in